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# Strange Woods

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*Strange Woods*

by  
Song Park

A thesis presented to  
the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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## **Abstract**

I am interested in searching for images of women that have not been adequately represented in visual art. As a visual artist, I am directed by my sense of sight to investigate and know something. I like to challenge myself to visualize things that do not already have a visual representation. It has been frustrating for me to create images of women, and I have experienced a deep ambivalence in response to the different images of women I have encountered. The socially and culturally constructed images of women that I have internalized and those that have developed from my own experience of being a woman do not coincide. Images derived from the concept of woman as a symbol of beauty and sexuality are images I have culturally assimilated as a result of growing up in a patriarchal society. However, images representing a female identity developed from my experience, from childhood to adolescence to womanhood, do not correspond with the images that have been forced upon me. This conflict undermines my knowledge of “woman” and transfers it into the unknown. This conflict evokes anxiety and fear as I confront that unknown.

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## Introduction

This thesis will explore my art practice in two parts: 1) *Strange Woods*: Performance of Inner Dialog and 2) “*What a day!*”, “*Tell me about it!*”: Encounter Monsters.

In the first part, I discuss my practice of painting as a journey of acknowledging and questioning my inner struggle with the socially constructed representations of women that I have passively learned. In my painting series, *Strange Woods*, the act of painting is my tool for processing this conflict. I begin a painting with a formal approach to image-making and focus on the materiality of the paint. With my body as a primary medium, I continuously create disorder within forms since I enjoy wandering around in a state of mystery and chaos and solving the problems as I encounter them. Disordered and ordered forms coexist in my work, creating new rhythms. Such forms become both the foreground and the background subjects. I create female characters that resemble me physically and emotionally, as I paint. I place my characters in surreal psychedelic woods that represent the constraints I experience due to being a woman who lacks adequate representation. The characters wander and their body images change into numerous different mutations within the woods. My work is the product of a process of seeking the interwoven images of woman framed by a woman’s gaze that is free from cultural misrepresentations. The characters expose, break, destroy, and undergo metamorphosis in the woods, creating repulsive images; yet, simultaneously, they adore, love, embrace, and liberate their own image. As the first viewer of my own work, I also find myself torn between disgust for and celebration of these images. I blur the line between the gender stereotypes that determine which female body image is acceptable and which is taboo, thus, finding my own interpretation of images of female potential. I have been influenced by other artists, and I am interested to discover how my visual language and theirs create a new visual language, or representation, of woman.

In the second part, I expand my interest from the objectification of women in dominant forms of representation, and I discuss the monstrosity of the sex dummy for men, which is created

as a model of the female anatomy, in relation to the monstrosity of my self-objectification as a result of being forced to learn how to be an attractive woman in society. As my practice progressed, I extended my narrative by positioning two three-dimensional characters having a conversation in an imaginary home garden.

The one on the left is a manufactured sex dummy, a creature based on an image of a woman sexually objectified by men, and the other on the right is a female figure, similar in character to the female subject in the series, *Strange Woods*, that represents my struggle with the rejection and embrace of my gender identity, which has been influenced by self-objectification and by objectification by my culture and society.

In this work, I explore the materiality of mixed media to create semiotic representations, such as the stereotype of femininity as a socially acceptable femininity, and taboo femininity by the making of and juxtaposing of two grotesque monster-like characters. The cluster of objects that covers the figure's body on the right evokes a chaotic feeling, a reference to my narrative of searching and developing a new representation of a woman. This process enables me to describe the complexity of my struggle of visualizing the representation of a woman as a woman. Finally, I find that the path to self-liberation from the abjection that results from my self-objectification arises from a process of creating work that focuses on discharging my obsession with these objects, free from self- observation.

***Strange Woods: Performance of an Inner Dialog***

Nature here is vile and base. I wouldn't see anything erotic here. I would see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and... growing and... just rotting away. Of course, there's a lot of misery. But it is the same misery that is all around us. The trees here are in misery, and the birds are in misery. I don't think they - they sing. They just screech in pain. It's an unfinished country. It's still prehistorical. [...] There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this, I say this all full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it, I love it. I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgment.

-Herzog, Burden of Dreams<sup>i</sup>



*The Body and The Painting*

As I created a series of paintings, *Strange Woods: metamorphosis* (fig. 3), *Ophelia* (fig. 4), *What did you find in the woods?* (fig. 12), *In the shower* (fig. 13), I experimented with the idea that my paintings form the layers of my body's performance. Griselda Pollock described the body...

[...] not as biological entity, but as the psychically constructed image that provides a location for and imageries of the processes of the unconscious, for desire and fantasy.<sup>ii</sup>

I believe my body is the only tool that can reveal my subconscious desire. In my work, my body is a tool for visualizing the complex interwoven images of a woman from the perspective of a woman's gaze. I have been inspired by feminist artists of the late 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as Carolee Schneemann and Cindy Sherman, who explore representations of the "female body" in relation to issues of sexual violence, pornography, women's self-suppression as a cause of aging, and motherhood. My use of the body in the process of painting is a performance intended to understand and to take ownership of my inner dialog. I am inspired by Carolee Schneemann's use of her body in her performance, *Interior Scroll* that at East Hampton, New York, and at the Telluride Film Festival, Colorado.

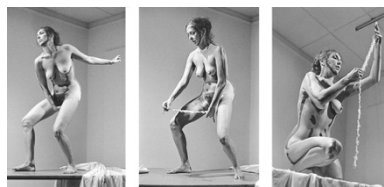


fig. 1 Carolee Schneemann, stills from *Interior Scroll*, 1975<sup>iii</sup>

During her performance (fig. 1), Schneeman pulls a rolled scroll from her vagina and reads the text written on it. The text is a reference to the super 8 film *Kitch's Last Meal*. The following is the part of the text that stood out to me:

during the half hour of  
pulsing dots I compose letters  
dream of my lover  
write a grocery list  
rummage in the trunk  
for a missing sweater

plan the drainage pipes for  
the root cellar ...<sup>iv</sup>

This was Schneemann's response to viewing a structuralist film made by a male structuralist filmmaker who condemned her film based on sexual discrimination. However, the humor in Schneemann's response incorporated an outraged body which strengthened her statement.

I was fascinated by her use of her body as a primary medium of her work. She opposes the traditional representations of a woman as an object, emphasizing women's subjectivity by situating herself both as the artist and as the subject of her own creation.

Schneemann made statements about her body such as, "At times my body seemed a battleground of projected taboos, and contradictions."<sup>v</sup> I was inspired by her statement that she sees her body as more than a physical image but as a tool to convey the core concepts of her work.

In my series of paintings, *Strange Woods*, uses my body as one of the primary media, that at once conducts the performance of painting and at the same time represents the female figure as the major subject of the painting. However, unlike Schneemann, my performance is a private one as part of my painting process, not one performed for an audience. As my painting is performed, my body as well as the paint become the primary media to create the painting. The inseparable relationship between the body and the painting can be understood through Jean-Luc Nancy's following lines:

Painting is the art of bodies, in that it only knows about skin, being skin through and through. Another name for local color is carnation. Carnation is the great challenge posed by those millions of bodies in paintings: not *incarnation*, where Spirit infuses the body, but carnation plain and simple, referring to the vibration, color, frequency, and nuance of place, of an event of existence.<sup>vi</sup>

Nancy assimilates the body and the painting, describing the body as a location where sensing takes place, in the following lines:

Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space (space is filled everywhere): they are open space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly spacious than spatial, what could also be called a place. Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a there, a "here," a "here is," for a this. The body-place isn't full or empty, since it doesn't have an outside or an inside, any more than it has parts, a

totality functions, or finality. [...] The body is a place that opens, displaces and spaces phallus and cephalic: making room for them to create an event (rejoicing, suffering, thinking, being born, dying, sexing, laughing, sneezing trembling, weeping, forgetting ...).<sup>vii</sup>

In my work, my body opens a space where the products of my imagination can exist in the form of a painting. Intimately touching the painting with my hands and eyes evokes events and feelings reflecting my subconscious or new and mysterious experiences, baffling me as I pass through them. I rely upon my intuition and the flow of the movements of my body to construct my images because I enjoy seeing the images created by focusing on my body's sensibility. I do not refer to representational images and do not plan how the painting will appear in its final form. By doing so, I can avoid any influence from socially constructed stereotypical images, except for those that have influenced me continuously due to my culture permeating my visual language. Painting without a plan places me in a natural environment, as if I were in the woods, a place free of any geographical information. In such a place, my sensibility becomes acute. I can respond to the stimulation of any sense while I am painting. I wander through the internal aspects of the painting and find my way by intuitively making the gestural marks. Often, I feel lost while working on a painting because I do not know what is going to happen next. The unknown creates anxiety and fear; however, it can also be meditative. I feel free from social exteriors and can focus on my internal world. The movements of my body and the materiality of the paint become my eyes and permit me to visualize my inner thoughts and emotions through the language of painting. The process becomes a kind of self-seeking liberation from the struggle between the social expectations of the exterior and the self-suppression of the interior.

The female body is crucial to the visual narrative of my painting. I tend to create scenes of naked female figures wandering in the woods. I imagine surreal woods where figures comparable to me find themselves and wander while their bodies undergo a metamorphosis. The woods are symbolic places where we can no longer see and experience consciously. In literature, for example,

in *Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Wizard of Oz*, the woods are frightening transitional places where characters must confront their fears and their inner struggles before they arrive at a happy ending. The woods in my series of paintings have a similar symbolism. In addition, Herzog's interpretation of the jungle in *Burden of Dreams*, "choking and fighting for survival and... growing and... just rotting away," and where the presence of "misery" is epidemic and is applicable to my use of woods in my paintings.<sup>viii</sup> There are struggle and misery present in my woods; however, that is not their only feature. My woods are similar to Allison Schulnik's woods in her film *Eager*. (fig. 2)



fig. 2 Allison Schulnik, still from *Eager*, 2014<sup>ix</sup>

In Schulnik's woods, nature is vibrating, killing, dying, and growing. However, all natural forms coexist and dance in a beautiful synchrony. The absurd monster-like characters dance and metamorphose in the woods attuned to the cycles of nature. Schulnik's woods are places where things are changing constantly and where the polarized processes of light and dark, beauty and cruelty, coexist in the same space. The woods in my paintings depict the coexistence of light and dark in process, where nothing stays as it is. They represent transitional spaces, where I experience feelings of confusion and fear as my body transforms from childhood to adolescence to womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir expresses this with the following words:

The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straight forward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy.<sup>x</sup>

Even though feminist discourses of the body and representation have been prevalent for decades, women are still suffering due to stereotypical representations of female bodies. For

example, the “black protest” that took place in South Korea in 2016 against the criminalization of abortion proves that the South Korean government will still imprison women based upon decisions they make about their own bodies. The latest 2017 feminist movement, #metoo, saw women who have experienced sexual assault and harassment post their stories on social media with the #metoo hashtag, which demonstrated the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment. I believe that sexual violence against women in the contemporary world is rooted in the objectification of women due to misrepresentation, and a lack of alternative of images in media and literature that are more resonant with the actual women we encounter on a daily basis. Mainstream media and literature objectify women, and create a division between representations of women that are deemed acceptable and those deemed taboo, the attractive versus the ugly, and the heroine versus the femme fatale. In my paintings, I blur the line between such representations that are constructed by the male gaze. The female characters in these paintings cannot be represented in one word. They are not animals, monsters, princesses, pixies, witches, mothers, wives, girls, whores, virgins, slaves, prisoners, or heroes.

The female figures in my paintings exist as animated subjects rather than inanimate objects. Brush marks and the materiality of paint are used to give their vibrating forms a visual but abstract representation. The depictions of these female figures are far from idealized. Their appearance is more monstrous than recognizably human.



fig. 3 Song Park, *Metamorphosis*, 2017<sup>xi</sup>

In *Metamorphosis* (fig. 3), the body of the female figure is difficult to discern at a glance. From a distance, it appears that the painting is about a celebration of abstract forms in attractive colors. When viewers discover the figure by looking closely, it appears that the figure's body is moving, changing, and merging with its surroundings, and that parts of the body are barely connected to each other. Flesh-toned colors and certain figurative forms remind viewers of parts of the human body, helping them to distinguish the figure from its surroundings. However, the imperfect placement of the body parts forces viewers to perceive the body as mutilated. Then, suddenly, the image becomes repulsive, since the female body appears like chunks of meat rather than a human being. Experiencing the ambivalence evoked by the image, which is both attractive and repulsive, raises questions about the flaws of female representation and socially constructed stereotypes of the female body.



fig. 4 Song Park, *Ophelia*, 2017<sup>xii</sup>

My paintings depict a new representation of a woman that is created by a collision and an infusion of previous images representing the female body. Several images coexist in the work *Ophelia* (fig. 4), which shows how I struggle with a conflicted response to different societal representations of women. I repeat my methods of abstraction and figuration back and forth to manage this conflict; I tend to depict the floating representational images in my mind that are influenced by external events. However, as soon as the images are noticeable, I abstract the forms and overlap other forms onto

the image. The overlapped representational images of a woman collaged with my emotional and intuitional interpretations create a new representation of woman.



fig. 5 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852 (left)<sup>xiii</sup>  
fig. 6 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #264*, 1992 (right)<sup>xiv</sup>

One of the images I connect to my painting is Millais' *Ophelia* (fig. 5), depicting *Ophelia* from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I learned about this painting a long time ago; however, recently, I looked at it again since I considered including the painting in my art history paper for the topic on "Do fictional characters have portraits?" In my opinion, fictional characters can be represented; however, they cannot have portraits because, unlike a human being, a fictional character's essence is reinterpreted over the course of time by readers. Based on the idea of representation versus portrait, I re-examined how *Ophelia* is interpreted and represented by Millais. In Shakespeare's play, *Ophelia* is depicted as a naïve country girl whose life is molded by the male characters around her. In addition, she faces a tragic death by drowning in a river. Millais' representation of *Ophelia* is fairly accurate but also surreal. Her corpse-like face communicates that she is giving up her life; however, simultaneously, she is objectified and depicted as unrealistically calm and beautiful while drowning. The figure in my painting presents the same visual information as Millais' *Ophelia*. Her body seems to be drowning in a river made of the viscous materiality of paint. However, the river of paint does not represent the literal river as in Millais' *Ophelia*. It represents the social world, the exterior forces that define my figure. Her body is sinking into the river of paint but is simultaneously struggling and fighting against the river.



Another image I linked to my painting was a work by Cindy Sherman using sex dummies (*fig. 6*). Since I am deeply inspired by Sherman's method of creating images by juxtaposing her own body with cultural representations of the female body, I was not surprised to uncover this connection to my painting. Sherman dressed and photographed a pornographic plastic dummy in a coquettish pose. The subject's distorted, inhuman body has exaggerated breasts and female genitalia open outwards toward the viewer. As a viewer, I was drawn to the duality of aggression and seduction evoked by the confrontation between the subject's grotesque, surreal-looking body juxtaposed with her direct gaze toward me. Her gaze suggests that I am entering her private space without permission. I feel ambiguous about the subject. It is neither a sex doll nor a woman. This ambiguity positions me as a viewer and as an undescriptive subject who speculates upon her situation. Art critic Jan Avgikos describes the significance of looking as follows:

For the problems of oppression and objectification that surround pornography do not reside exclusively in the image, but in the very act of looking, in which we ascribe sexual difference.<sup>xv</sup>

Sherman changed my "act of looking" by juxtaposing a pornographic dummy with an eroticized image of a woman to create a new image.



fig. 7 Song Park, details of *Ophelia*, 2017

My interpretations are shown as brush marks in visual form. My painting is similar to improvised jazz, in a way. The visual narrative is made interesting by the tensions created by variations in the speed of my body movements. Fast body movements increase the tension of the painting and leave sharp, loud marks. The slow movements release that tension and create organic

and curvy gestural lines. This method of painting, which I employed in painting Ophelia, is inspired by the work of Cecily Brown, who created *Untitled (Banquet)* (fig. 8).



fig. 8 Cecily Brown, *Untitled (Banquet)*, 2012<sup>xvi</sup>

As a viewer of Brown's painting, the manner in which the figures exist inside the physicality and materiality of the oil paint strikes me the most. The paint becomes something more than just a medium; it metamorphoses into images, figures, and narratives. The bodies in her painting are entangled with each other and create an aura of violence. Naked male and female figures, or physical forms that resemble the human body, engage in sexual acts. These figures are depicted by marks of explosive frenzy and colors such as pink, red, and black, which create a dramatic flow of energy. In addition, the tensions between the forms in the painting are celebratory and enticing. They attract me as a viewer; however, the coercive energy of these human-like images that I am confronted with, fills me with fear and anxiety.

Both my paintings and Brown's *Untitled (Banquet)* (fig. 8) evoke similar ambivalent response in viewers who are repulsed as well as attracted to the images in each painting. In both of our works, not only do the subjects merge with the nature of the material but they are also formed by the merging process. However, in my paintings, the effect and purpose of the marks are different. Brown's marks depict a flow of energy and violent movement. However, I make marks that overlap and abstract the subjects as my inner thoughts and emotions interfere with them as they are formed.

In addition, in my work, brush strokes provide a method for understanding female representations. I try to express ambiguous emotions in a visual language represented by my subjects; therefore, during the editing process, the various re-figuration marks that look similar to

Brown's remain on the canvas. Fast and sharp marks have been considered aggressive or violent due to abstract expressionism's traditional concept of masculinity; however, the common interpretation of this type of brush stroke is not applicable to my paintings, which aim to convey ambiguity. It is a new language that cannot be spoken yet.

*Expressive marks and the female rhetoric of painting: Metonym*

As a female artist who deals with the visual language of expressive mark-making and figuration in painting, I question the Western culture's historical characterization of expressive mark-making as masculine. How can the marks made by female artists be described, if the masculinity of marks is decided by their visual effects? I am fascinated by Robert Hobbs' gendered comparison of the rhetorical tools employed by artists historically associated with abstract expressionism during mid-twentieth century America. Hobbs suggests that, on the one hand, work by the widely acknowledged female Abstract Expressionists, such as Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler tend to employ a metonymical rhetoric, while the other hand, male artists tend to metaphorize their art. Often, male abstract expressionists were concerned with establishing "signature images," where an image or type of image became closely identified with a specific artist. For example, Jackson Pollock's paint drips, Rothko's veil-like images, and Clyfford Still's patchwork of forms are all well known. These images are readable as the male artists have a metaphorical relationship with their work. Hobbs argues that the signature images of these male artists were dependent on their egos, and that the relationship between these men and their work was based on dominance rather than coexistence. On the other hand, Hobbs explores how metonymy characterizes the work of female artists where,

[...] Metonymy serves as an excellent retrospective tool for looking at the role desire plays in Krasner's Mitchell's and Frankenthaler's works where nature's metonymic connections are not reified or known beforehand in terms of either a specific or generalized landscape. Instead they are established through intuited needs and yet held in abeyance as perpetual mysteries, with clues tauntingly revealed slowly over time in terms of painted fragments, shards reflective of lives undergoing continual transformation in terms of breakup, renewal, and reconnection<sup>xvii</sup>

Based on Hobbs I found a metonymical rhetoric in *Cat Image (fig. 9)*, created by female Abstract Expressionist Lee Krasner. Krasner drew her autograph on the bottom right corner of the painting as if it were a form of painting. The autograph which represents the artist herself is almost

unreadable; however, it coexists with the other forms and it transforms her signature into one of her repetitive orbicular gestural line drawings.



fig. 9 Lee Krasner, *Cat Image*, 1957<sup>xviii</sup>

As a viewer, I look into the painting for a long time, and the autograph slowly appears but then suddenly reunites with the forms surrounding it. The underlying and uniting role of her autograph is a sign of a metonym that clearly differentiates her work from that of male abstract expressionists.



fig. 10 Song Park, image of studio at Lewis center, St. Louis, 2017

The rhetoric of metonym also exists in my paintings and appears in two forms. First, metonym describes my relationship with my work. I position myself inside the painting when I paint. Before I start painting, there are no specific images in my mind and I do not know where I am going. It is like wandering in the woods to a place where I have never been before. To find the way, I draw lines and shapes. The act of painting is a two-way conversation between me and my painting. Laying down paint on the canvas is my way of speaking to the painting. Then, I step back from the canvas and listen to my marks and forms on the canvas to get a hint of where I should go next and where I am now and, then, I react to those marks and forms. The rhetoric in my relationship with

my painting is metonymical, not hierarchical, but instead explores a process of mutual understanding. In my series of paintings *Strange Woods*, this rhetoric is visible in the marks that were created by repeatedly adding and removing paint.

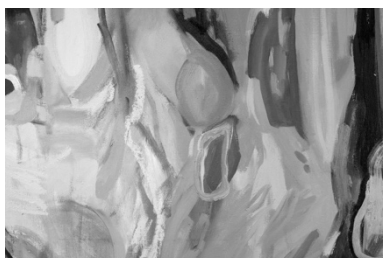


fig. 11 Song Park, details of *Metamorphosis*, 2017

Secondly, the rhetoric of metonym resides in the narrative of my work. Neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor, who experienced a stroke in the left hemisphere of her brain, has publicly described the stroke experience as well as her long recovery. My rhetorical process resonates with Taylor's description of the moment when she experienced the stroke as follows:

The essence of your energy expands as it blends with the energy around you, and you sense that you are as big as the universe. Those little voices inside your head, reminding you of who you are and where you live, become silent. You lose memory connection to your old emotional self and the richness of this moment, right here, right now, captivates your perception. Everything, childlike curiosity, your heart soars in peace and your mind explores new ways of swimming in the sea of euphoria.<sup>xix</sup>

During Taylor's experience of a stroke, objects lost their significance and hierarchical structures collapsed, as objects overlapped and mingled with each other. In my paintings, I aim to be open and accepting. I do not want to make dogmatic one-image paintings for myself; rather, I want to be open to evoking a wide range of reactions in viewers. To achieve this, I deconstruct the representations of oppressed women and merge and combine them in the paintings, thereby creating a new image. The representations lose their previous semiotic associations and become free. During this process, because I am looking at a new image that I have not seen before, I feel freed from oppression. I want my audience to have the same experience that I had while painting. I hope that

they speculate about the forms and find their own forms on the canvas. I want them to be surprised by what they see and what the painting conveys, what it evokes in them.



## ***Faux Representation***

faux

ADJECTIVE

1 Made in imitation; artificial.

1.1 Not genuine; fake or false.<sup>xx</sup>

One might then view writing, or art in general, not as the only treatment but as the only “know-how” where phobia is concerned.

- Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*<sup>xxi</sup>

It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because of what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many.

- Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>xxii</sup>



fig. 12 Song Park, *What did you find in the woods?*, 2017 (left)

fig. 13 Song Park, *In the shower*, 2018 (right)

In the later works in the series, *Strange Woods*, *What did you find in the woods?* (fig. 12) and *in the shower* (fig. 13), I continued figuring the images of a woman, as *Metamorphosis* (fig. 3) and *Ophelia* (fig. 4) show, and expanded my interests to coding the narrative of the painting by adding figurative elements and by building the distinctive personality of the female subject. The figurative components within the pool of abstract forms arouse the viewer's curiosity. One of the most figurative elements in *What did you find in the woods?* (fig. 12) is a female character in the center writing the word, "faux", on the purple ground, and the word "faux" is also repeatedly shown in *in the shower* (fig. 13) as well. The text is the most figurative element in the image and it draws the viewers' attention. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word meaning,

faux  
ADJECTIVE  
1 Made in imitation; artificial.  
1.1 Not genuine; fake or false.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Suddenly the meaning of the word codes other elements in the painting, and a range of paradoxical narratives are generated. For example, it questions and tricks the artist and the viewer into questioning the authenticity of the representations in the painting being looking at. Therefore, it asks specific questions without answering them, and instead is open to a range of interpretations created by viewers. Such as, are the figures monsters or human beings? What are monsters, what are humans? Are they women? If they are, do I and you agree on it? These questions challenge the knowledge

passively gained from numerous representational images, and they lead me to refer to my “primary knowledge” and create a new representation of woman in my own language. “Primary knowledge” is phrase that I borrowed from Schneeman’s writing, “This source of interior knowledge could be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship. I relate womb and vagina to primary knowledge.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

I believe that representations of woman evoke conflict due to the lack of representation of the woman’s gaze but also some misrepresent women. Judith Butler addresses the dual function of the representation of women where,

‘representation’ is controversial term that it serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women.<sup>xxv</sup>

Some representations do not reveal but distort the essence of the subject. I have seen many so-called representations of women as misrepresentations. My reasoning derived from my inability to relate to those representations of a woman as a woman. For example, in my work, my new representation of woman, according to my interpretation, reveals my emotional struggle as a woman to free myself from “distorted” misrepresentations of women. In addition, the word faux itself is an important feature of the overall concept of my work. I intended it to be read as a sign of the danger of representational images that force me to limit myself, and that prevent my perspective from changing, which objectifies me and arouses great fear in me. I consider myself an artist because the process of art making is the best way to discover and visualize the fact that I am changing, and therefore, I am alive and that relieves me. However, representational images pacify viewers and impede their open interpretation of the visual.

***“What a day!”, “Tell me about it!”: Encounter Monsters***



fig. 14 Song Park, *"What a day!", "Tell me about it!"*, 2018

My work, *"What a day!", "Tell me about it!"* (fig. 14) is an installation of an imaginary home garden where two female characters are having a conversation. The visual contrast between the two characters is stark. The figure on the left is a manufactured sex object, an inflatable sex dummy for men, and the figure on the right has been created from plaster and chicken wire as a base, with mixed media and oil paint as her skin. The contrasting physical and visual weight of each medium and how each object has been constructed between the figures emphasizes the separate worlds they belong to, and the emotional weight of the righthand figure. However, their action of smoking together, facing each other, and the open gesture of the figure on the right create a strange kinship between the two grotesque looking figures.

*Sex Dummy as a Monster*



fig. 15 Song Park, details of *"What a day!"*, *"Tell me about it!"*, 2018 (left)  
 fig. 16 Image of the package of *Lusty Busty Love Doll* made by Nasstoys (right)

In my work, the dummy represents the grotesqueness and ugliness of the men's desire to objectify women and my fear of being objectified. The purpose of the dummy is to fulfill men's hegemonic masculine desire for women, that is physical and psychological dominance. Whatever the man's behavior toward the dummy, the dummy will not fight back. On the original package of the dummy (*fig. 16*), it says, "This bodacious blonde is begging for you to fill her juicy holes with your throbbing manhood!". The commercialization of the product not only objectifies women's bodies, but also ascribes a subjectivity to the doll, which is "begging" for men's sexual satisfaction with her body. The commercialization of the doll suggests that the men who purchase the doll satisfy their hegemonic masculine desire to own a woman by owning a doll. The doll that looks like a woman will not challenge any man. Therefore, I believe that owning the doll is an act of aggression toward the doll. Kristeva explains the relationship between want and aggressivity as follows,

Let me say then that want and aggressivity are chronologically separable but logically coextensive. [...] To speak of want alone is to repudiate aggressivity in obsessional fashion; to speak of aggressivity alone, forgetting want, amounts to making transference paranoidal.<sup>xxvi</sup>

With reference to Kristeva's writing, I suggest that the sex doll is an object of a phobia that entangles want and aggressivity. From my point of view as a woman, it is a scary, grotesque, monstrous creature, that emphasizes women's body parts that have erotic symbolism due to the commercialization of sex in pornography. The sex doll (*fig. 15*) in my work is especially inhuman looking. It is made of plastic and it is inflatable. The surface is cold and stiff like a corpse. The



mouth is shaped as an aid for male masturbation, it is unrealistically round and hollow inside. The facial expression of the doll looks like it is frightened or gasping for air. It is a repulsive image. As a viewer, I put myself in the subject's position and imagine the relationship between the doll and a man. This evokes great fear. Their relationship is uncanny to me, because the doll's owner expects an interaction with it that echoes the hegemonic relationship between a man and woman, even though the doll is an object created to cater to male sexual fantasy. Artist, Becky Yee created a series of photographs, *More than a Woman*, that deals with the intimate relationship between a man and his doll.



fig. 17 Becky Yee, *Untitled #3*, 2008<sup>xxvii</sup>

In Yee's photograph, *Untitled #3* (fig. 17), a man is hugging a life-size silicon sex doll in a domestic setting. Although the sex doll in Yee's picture has more of a resemblance to a real woman than the sex doll in my work, I still find the image disturbing. I was agitated by the touching in the work. The juxtaposition of the real body and synthetic body and the act of hugging evoked a sense of a strange emotional intimacy in me. The blank gaze of the doll toward the viewer creates the illusion that the man is hugging a corpse. Although the doll has the convincing look of a real woman, its gaze and the contrast between man's human flesh and doll's synthetic body immediately creates a barrier between me and the doll, and I am confused by what I am looking at and it horrifies

me because the sex dummy reveals the monstrosity of the man's willing intimacy with a passive and unanimated object that replicates woman's body.

*Me as a Monster*



fig. 18 Song Park, image of studio at Lewis Center, St. Louis, 2018 (left)

fig. 19 Song Park, details of "*What a day!*", "*Tell me about it!*", 2018 (right)

The woman on the right of my sculptural installation represents my struggle with my life-long self-objectification as a woman and discharges my obsession. The mixed materials daubed on an imperfect body structure create a grotesque and monstrous image. The woman's body is far from the ideal female body. The body parts are elongated, enlarged, and relocated. The woman on the left is a manufactured object, an inflatable sex doll, a sex toy made for men that is supposed to represent a female body. By juxtaposing these two different representations of woman in a home garden setting, stereotypically considered a woman's space, I wanted to create a tension in the narrative of the work, between the grotesque objectification and self-objectification of woman.



fig. 20 Song Park, details of "*What a day!*", "*Tell me about it!*", 2018

The left side of the figure's body (*fig. 20*) is covered with objects such as artificial flowers, beads, and rhinestones representing the stereotyped qualities of femininity. I intended them to seem as if they had grown from the inside of her body and had overgrown to dominate her body. The

arrangement of these objects creates interesting visual effects. I believe each object is an original gesture for its own sake. Schneeman writes about the gesture of material,

The fundamental life of any material I use is concretized in that material's gesture: gestation – source of compression (measure of tension and expansion), resistance – developing force of visual action. Manifest in space, any particular gesture acts on the eye as a unit of time. Performers of glass, fabric, wood ... all are potent as variable gesture units: color, light, and sound will contrast or enforce the quality of a particular gesture's area of action and its emotional texture.<sup>xxviii</sup>

I am inspired by Schneemann, and I believe the gesture of any material creates a visual effect that viewers react to. In addition, the original gesture of the object can be shifted by the touch of the artist or viewers. There are gestures between the objects that inform how the objects are arranged. Another gesture is articulated when the viewer's eye touches the objects. In my work, the chaotically arranged clustered beads, laces, artificial flowers and so on (*fig. 20*) lose their own gesture such as precious, soft, shining and so on, to create a newly repulsive image such as disorder, wounds or organs spilling from the body.

Conceptually these objects represent how I feel about my childhood, the gender role assigned to me, and how my gender identity caused my self-objectification. As a woman, I have experienced self-objectification through surveilling and judging myself with reference to social sex norms that I felt obliged to embody. Psychologists Linda Smolak and Sarah K Muren state the following:

[...] sexualization needs to be frequent and widespread enough to approximate a social norm. Sexualization facilitates women's development of the belief that a sexy appearance is important not only to appeal to men but also to be successful in all areas of life. This belief is key to internalizing the sexual gaze, that is, self-objectification. As a pervasive influence, sexualization exists in multiple forms and is directed at many girls and women from a variety of sources. [...] Furthermore, there are punishments, or at least fewer opportunities, for not following the sexy norms.<sup>xxix</sup>

Smolak and Muren basically argue that sexualization, in other words, sexual objectification, in “multiple forms” is directed at women throughout society and leads to women's self-

objectification. In the following paragraphs, I want to share my personal experiences, based upon my own memory of how I learned gender norms and used them to develop self-objectification.

I was born and raised in the conservative South Korean community of Gyeongsang-do. This region has a long history of supporting the South Korean conservative parties. Its political atmosphere is changing gradually as the generations change; however, voting results from the recent South Korean presidential election in 2017 show that conservatism dominates the region still.<sup>xxx</sup>

In addition, Gyeongsang-do's culture is influenced by the regional political atmosphere. The gender culture I experienced most strongly included specific gender roles within the form of "family." Although the concept of gender equality in South Korea started to develop much later than in Western countries, due to the rise of the women's movement and the establishment of political institutions for women, the gender policies in South Korea have been shifting gradually toward greater equality. The recent decades have witnessed significant gender policy changes in South Korea, including the abolition of prostitution and the "family-head system" (hojuje) in 2004 and 2005, respectively. When I was growing up, the formation of my gender identity was affected strongly by the "family-head system," an archaic family system in South Korea, that developed under colonial-era Korean family law. It is a system with distinct gender roles based on Confucianism and has become deeply rooted in Korean tradition; during the early years of Japanese colonial rule, it was even codified in the law. Under this system, every family has a family head who is the firstborn male in the family. The head can pass his position down to the next male family member on the basis of primogeniture. However, only males can become family heads and the legal status of females remained completely inferior to that of males.<sup>xxxi</sup>



fig. 21 picture of me as a five years old girl in Korean traditional dress, 1996

My family members have adopted traditional gender roles also. My father has been the head of the family and he made all the economic decisions while my mother took care of the household. My father makes most of the important decisions in the family, and my mother and I follow his wishes. Since I was a young girl, my parents and I have talked about me getting married. My mother used to stress the importance of marriage, especially for a woman, according to her experience. My parents wanted me to grow up as an intelligent, contemporary, independent woman; however, they also expected and prepared me to be a pure and nice woman, so I could marry a man and take care of a family. This Korean ideal of marriage oppresses both women and men by forcing them to follow set gender roles within marriage. Minjeong Kim's discussion of gender roles in heterosexual marriage points out the disadvantages for both men and women as follows:

Gendered practices that men perform in heterosexual marriage for their masculine identity and subordination of women can begin with marriage itself. The emphasis on compulsory marital heterosexuality has cultural authority over men as well as women. Becoming "a respectable family man" is set against "dangerous masculinities of the undomesticated male" and signals maturity in boys based on the role they assume as head of the family. [...] Blatant sexual objectification of women would be a divergent form of heterosexual masculinity. Beyond the simple fact of having a female partner, heterosexual marriage implies procreation, which, in turn, suggests sexual virility and the promise of fatherhood.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Because I grew up in a small community, sometimes other adults in the neighborhood including my parents would educate any young children they came across. I received the same messages from all the adults in my life. They used to scold me for unfeminine behavior, such as do not run when you are wearing a skirt, do not spread your legs when you sit, do not talk too loud, and cover your mouth when you laugh.



fig. 22 Yun Suknam, *The kitchen*, 1999<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Korean feminist artist Yun Suknam's installation, *The kitchen* (fig. 22), reflects my experience at home in South Korea. While I created a figure that represents the struggles of self-objectification, she made a figure that specifically shows a Korean woman's struggle with the gender role of mother. The installation represents a woman's primary domestic space, a kitchen, and the woman in that space is created from old scrap wood. The old and rotten wooden texture echoes the wrinkled skin and softness that invokes warm and intimate feelings. There is a chair without a body next to the wood piece. I am interested in the deficiency of the woman that resonates with how women have been seen in Korean society and the family, and their subordinate position at home, as mother, daughter, aunt, or sister that objectifies and oppresses them.



fig. 23 picture of me and my friends in school uniform, 2007

As I entered adolescence, I attended schools that required uniforms. The gender divisions became clearer. At middle school, wearing a uniform was the rule, and girls had to wear skirts. The uniform was tight and girls found it difficult to move when wearing it. Girls were punished for wearing track pants underneath their skirts. The combination of sexual objectification in school and



the experience of puberty, led me to establish an objectified view of myself. Nita Mary McKinley writes about the reasons for self-objectification in adolescent girls as follows:

Objectified body consciousness may be particularly strong in adolescence and young adulthood also because of the clash between the goals of attaining intimacy and striving for the achievement and identity among women. [...] Engaging in self-surveillance and other appearance management practices (e.g., dieting, cosmetic surgery) in an attempt to meet feminine beauty ideals may be a way that women can work simultaneously on identity, achievement, and intimacy goals in a culturally acceptable way.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

As McKinley states, I experienced my friends' group surveillance of my appearance on a daily basis and in all our interactions. Like a scene from the movie "*Mean Girls*," my friends and I shared everything about our appearance, and we encouraged each other to keep our bodies in shape. Aiming for the same goals made us best friends, and it was a relief that someone was ensuring I would not become a fat and ugly girl. I remember I had to lose weight or put on make-up, not to gain attention from boys, but to keep my friendships with girls. In *Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf writes,

What genuinely matters is that women remain willing to let others tell them what they can and cannot have. Women are watched, in other words, not to make sure that they will "be good," but to make sure that they will know they are being watched.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The mutual-surveillance of our friendship provided an intimacy and security that we needed during puberty. However, the way I learned to keep my relationships during adolescence remained deep inside me and influenced the formation of my identity. I acquired a habit of self-surveillance and of continuously judging myself in an attempt to find security.

## *Liberation*



fig. 24 Song Park, details of "*What a day!*", "*Tell me about it!*", 2018

In my work, the installation "*What a day!*", "*Tell me about it!*" (fig. 14), I tried to free myself from being a "watcher" of myself in the process of making the woman on the right. Unlike the process of painting the series, *Strange Woods*, which depicted wandering inside the work and figuring out my next move out as I wandered, the process of making the sculptural figure (fig. 24) in the installation was based on a specific plan which involved collecting and repetition. I collected the materials such as beads and fake flowers that visually attracted me, and I obsessively collaged and arranged them on the figure. To gather the materials, I had to shop around various craft shops. The objects I was specifically looking for had a similar visual language that seemed to represent stereotypes of femininity that I had internalized. The concept of femininity is a social construct and it is undefinable; however, it is encoded in images or feelings that reside in my subconscious. Moreover, the concept is fluid and varies between different people and cultures. As a person with an international identity, the images that pop in my mind when I think of femininity are connected to my memories of different cultures that represent the conflicts I had with different gendered social norms. In my experience as a woman, the social expectations that were forced upon me were specific enough to leave images embedded in my subconscious. As I mentioned above, I developed images of women and femininity by referring to women's position in the family, during the time I lived in South Korea with my parents. I learned that a woman should be a powerless, lifeless, and weak creature, who needs a husband to whom she is subordinated.

However, after I moved to the US, when I encountered different cultural expectations of women, and encountered people who grew up in a different culture to mine, I realized that the idea of femininity created by gendered social norms had oppressed me. To fit in, in addition to the femininity that I was forced to learn from the culture of my hometown, I had to adjust myself to new cultural expectations of femininity in the US. There was no escape from being a woman and I was suffocated by the expectations that followed. I got tired of playing the role of a socially likable woman, and I started to hide those aspects of my identity rooted in the category of femininity that were a product of my home culture. I still loved watching romantic comedies, going to flower shops, and collecting teddy bears; however, I tried to keep all this to myself. I avoided wearing flower patterns and clothes that revealed the curves of my female body in public. Instead, I started wearing a hoodie and track pants. I thought these changes would finally free me from the representation of the stereotypical woman. However, I was still behaving as if I was being “watched,” and still wanted permission for my actions from the “watchers.” I can link the journey guided by my monstrous desire to find and define my “femininity” to the Kristeva’s association of the abject with jouissance where:

One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on en jouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object a [in Lacan’s terminology], burst with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from floundering by making it repugnant<sup>xxxvi</sup>

My “desire” to be watched created a new objective that freed me from socially constructed concepts of femininity to be a “watcher” of myself instead. However, the concept of femininity merely developed new meanings which I internalized. The “Other”, me as a watcher, tried to

separate myself from “I” and “swallowed up” the subject, offering me abjection and oppression in return.

I felt freedom from myself as a watcher during the process of making my sculptural female figure. During the process of collecting the objects that evoked images of stereotypical femininity, such as beads and fake flowers, I found how I knew intuitively which objects I needed to find and how to use them. I did not need to do much research to figure it out, because it was all inside of me. My reason for making art freed me from my self judgment. For example, I would never go to a craft shop like Joann and Michael’s for myself because I do not want to be categorized as a “typical” woman who loves soft and flowery things. That judgment is coming from outside; however, to surveil and control my feelings and actions, I volunteered to become my own critic, judge, and watcher of myself. However, I had to spend a decent amount of time at craft shops to get the materials for my work. I talked to other women in the shops and got their advice on materials, and I discussed how beautiful the materials were. I felt comfortable in the environment, and I felt a sense of kinship with the women I met at these stores. It was an eye-opening experience for me that forced me to acknowledge the self I had locked up inside of me, which I then liberated by embracing it in the process of making art.

## Conclusion

This thesis looked into my art practice in two sections: 1) *Strange Woods*: Performance of Inner Dialog and 2) *“What a day!”*, *“Tell me about it!”*: Encounter Monsters.

I explore the subject woman in my art practice from various perspectives and in different forms. In my series of paintings, *Strange Woods*, I explored my interest in the flawed and lacking representation of women through the language of painting. In the process of painting, my body performs as a primary tool to read the thoughts and emotions that reside in my subconscious as the subject of my work. It is important because the goal of the painting is to visualize a new representation of woman constructed by a woman’s gaze, to ensure it can be owned fully by me, as a woman. I tend to create disordered wilderness scenes like woods as the locations for the characters in my paintings. The paintings represent my psychological struggle with the conflict between representational images of women that are constantly floating inside of my mind, and the chaotic characteristics of an unknown visual definition of woman. I position myself as my characters and wander as they wander in the painterly woods. As they wander their bodies metamorphose and produce repulsive body images transforming into monsters. I discover multiple images, different representations of women, in one painting as I paint, that creates a new image of a woman. In later paintings of the series, the text “faux” repeatedly appears and interacts with viewers’ interpretations of the painting. My work ultimately points at the fact that a woman cannot be represented in a dogmatic, closed way to others or to herself, but can have numerous representations due to changing, developing, interacting, and embracing herself and others.

In my installation *“What a day!”*, *“Tell me about it!”*, I explored the gestures of various objects. The arrangement and juxtaposition of different objects created a new visual language based upon gesture. For example, the juxtaposition of a ready-made sex dummy for men with a female character created by me presents a visual contrast, and challenges viewers to question the positioning of the objects and to generate their own narrative based on their relationship to them. Moreover, in the

process of building the female figure, I was able to acknowledge my habit of self-surveillance that has developed from a self-objectification that has left me with a feeling of abjection. However, surprisingly I felt liberated from this self-surveillance during the practice of gathering and repeatedly arranging and collaging stereotypically “feminine” objects that I had forced myself from appreciating. By discharging the obsession that I had imprisoned inside of me, I felt a freedom from being watched and being a watcher.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Yun Suk Nam, *The kitchen*, 1999, mixed media, 300 x 300 x 220 cm, Artist’s collection, [http://yunsuknam.com/works/04\\_pinkroom/pink\\_install12.htm](http://yunsuknam.com/works/04_pinkroom/pink_install12.htm).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Nita Mary McKinley, “Continuity and Change in Self-objectification: Taking A Life-Span Approach to Women’s Experiences of Objectified Body Consciousness,” in *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions*, ed. Rachel M. Calogero et al. (Washington: American Psychology Association, 2011): 104.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Morrow, 1991): 99.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 9.

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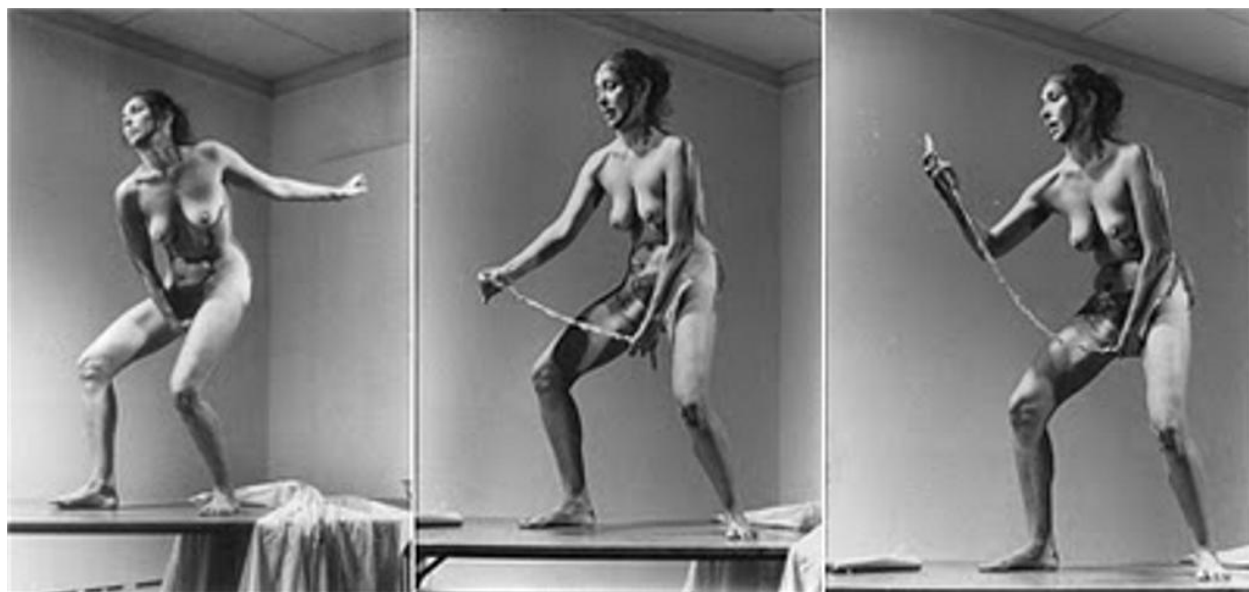


Figure 1

Carolee Schneemann  
Stills from *Interior Scroll*  
1975  
Performance



Figure 2

Allison Schulnik  
Stills from *Eager*  
2014  
film





Figure 3

Song Park  
*Metamorphosis*  
2017  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'





Figure 4

Song Park  
*Ophelia*  
2017  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'





Figure 5

John Everett Millais  
*Ophelia*  
1852  
oil on canvas  
762 x 1118 mm



Figure 6

Cindy Sherman  
*Untitled #264*  
1992  
Chromogenic print  
50 1/16" x 75 1/8"





Figure 7

Song Park  
details of *Ophelia*  
2017

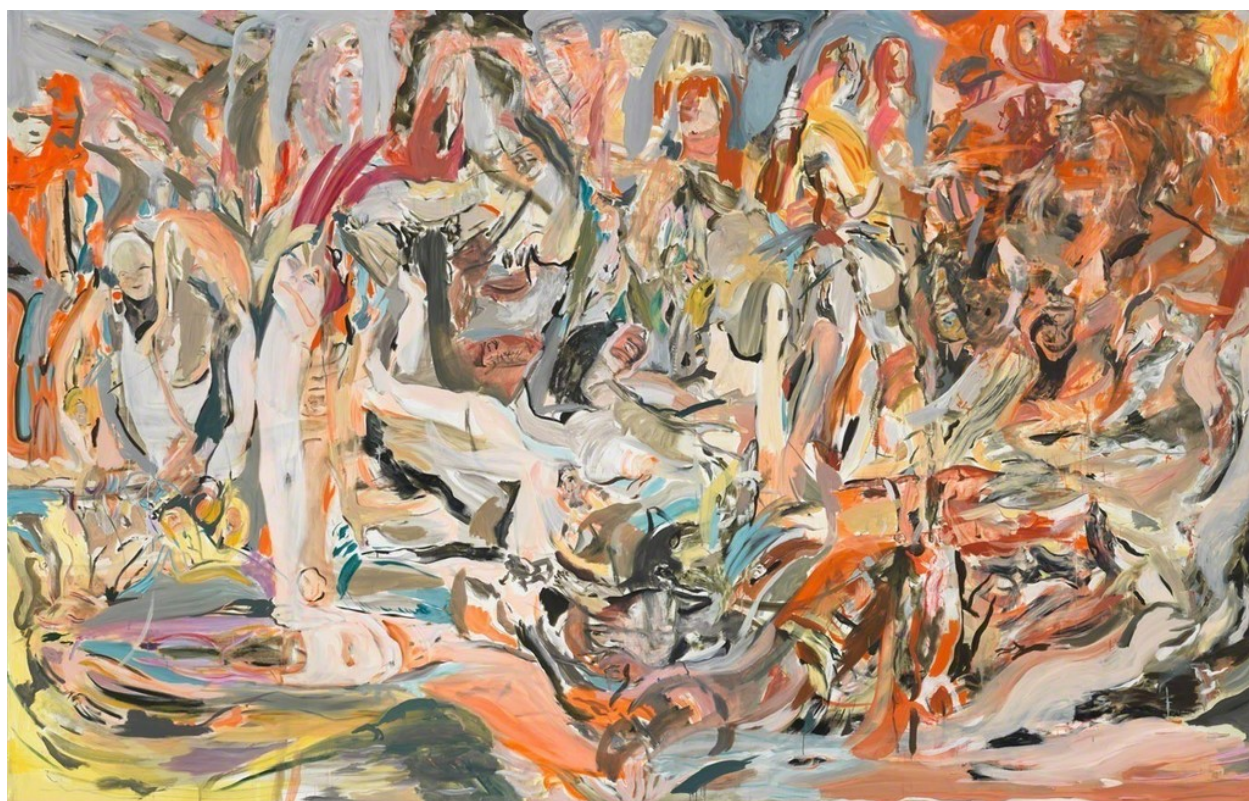


Figure 8

Cecily Brown  
*Untitled (Banquet)*  
2012  
oil on linen  
109" x 171"





Figure 9

Lee Krasner  
*Cat Image*  
1957  
oil on cotton duck  
39 1/8" x 58 1/8"

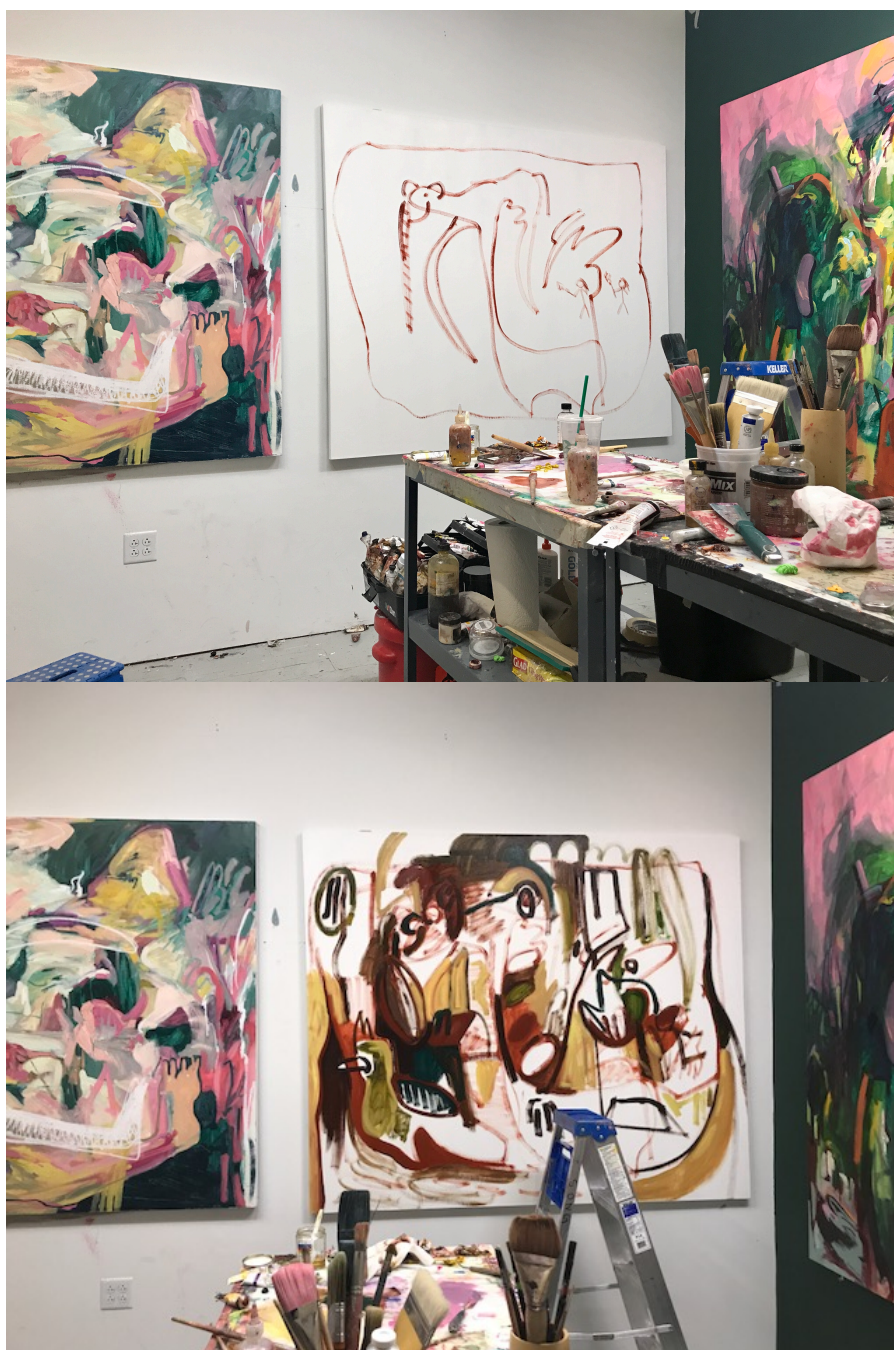


Figure 10

Song Park  
image of studio at Lewis center, St. Louis  
2017





Figure 11

Song Park  
details of *Metamorphosis*  
2017





Figure 12

Song Park  
*What did you find in the woods?*  
2017  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'



Figure 13

Song Park  
*In the shower*  
2018  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'





Figure 14

Song Park  
*"What a day!"; "Tell me about it!"*  
2018  
mixed media installation  
Approximately 87" x 95" x 51"



Figure 15

Song Park  
details of *"What a day!"*, *"Tell me about it!"*  
2018





Figure 16

Image of the package of *Lusty Busty Love Doll* made by Nasstoys



Figure 17

Becky Yee  
*Untitled #3*  
2008  
digital print  
20" x 16"



Figure 18

Song Park  
image of studio at Lewis Center, St. Louis  
2018





Figure 19

Song Park  
details of *"What a day!"*, *"Tell me about it!"*  
2018





Figure 20

Song Park  
details of *"What a day!"*, *"Tell me about it!"*  
2018



Figure 21

picture of me as a five years old girl in Korean traditional dress  
1996



Figure 22

Yun Suknam  
*The kitchen*  
1999  
mixed media  
300 x 300 x 220 cm





Figure 23

picture of me and my friends in school uniform  
2007



Figure 24

Song Park  
details of *"What a day!", "Tell me about it!"*  
2018

## Plates

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Plate 13. Song Park, *Bath*. 2015. oil on cotton duck, 4' x 3'.





Plate 1

Song Park  
*"What a day!", "Tell me about it!"*  
 2018  
 mixed media installation  
 Approximately 87" x 95" x 51"





Plate 2

Song Park  
*In the shower*  
2018  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'



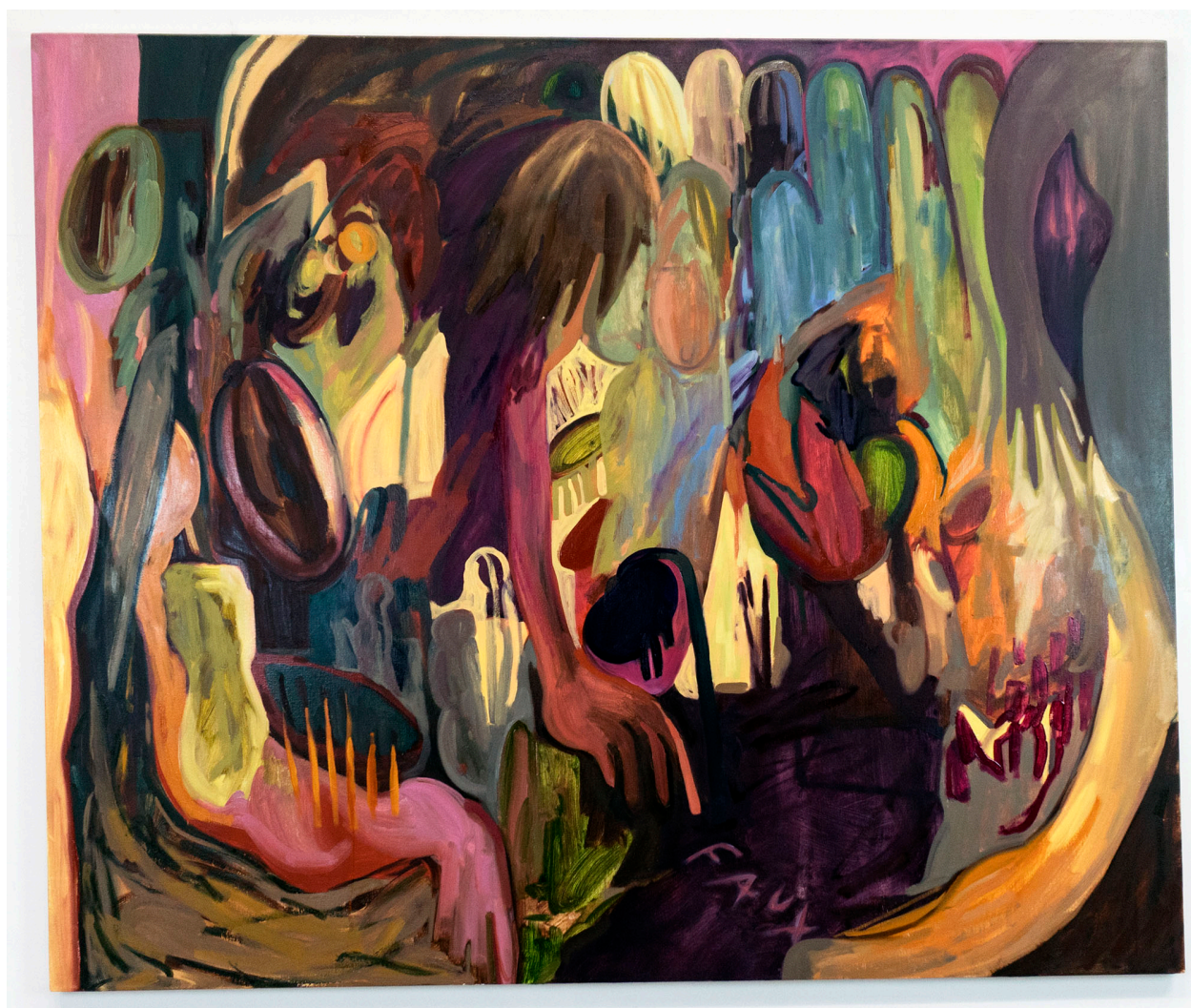


Plate 3

Song Park  
*What did you find in the woods?*  
2018  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'





Plate 4

Song Park  
*Ophelia*  
2017  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'



Plate 5

Song Park  
*Metamorphosis*  
2017  
oil on linen  
5' x 6'





Plate 6

Song Park  
*blue group 1*  
2017  
oil on canvas  
30" x 40"



Plate 7

Song Park  
*green group 1*  
2017  
oil on canvas  
30" x 40"





Plate 8

Song Park  
*pink group 1*  
2017  
oil on canvas  
30" x 40"

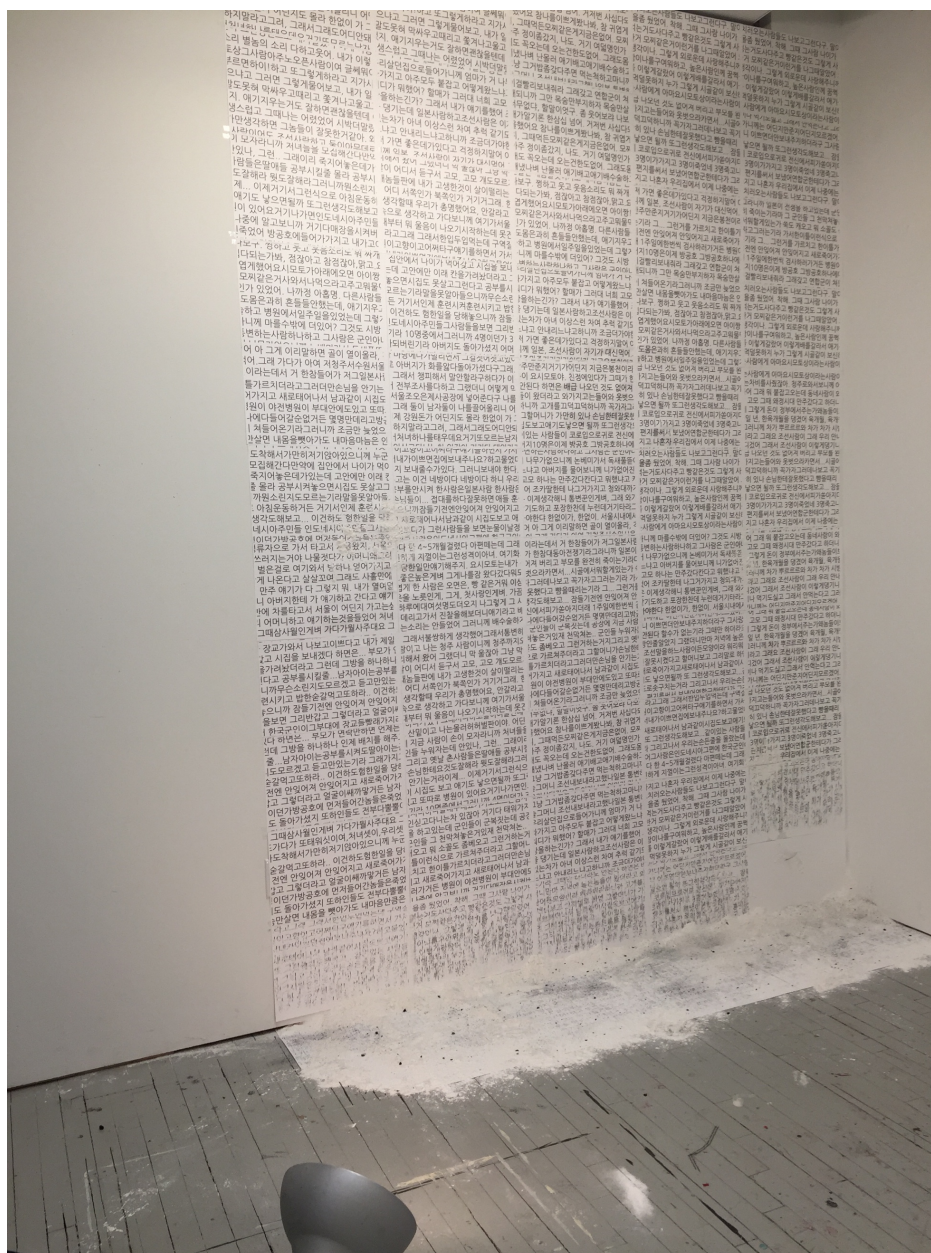


Plate 9

Song Park

Testimony Wall of ianfu(慰安婦)

2016

mixed media installation

Approximately 10' x 4' x 2'





Plate 10

Song Park  
*Black Protest at Gwanghwamun square in 2016*  
 2016  
 oil on cotton duck  
 7' x 8'



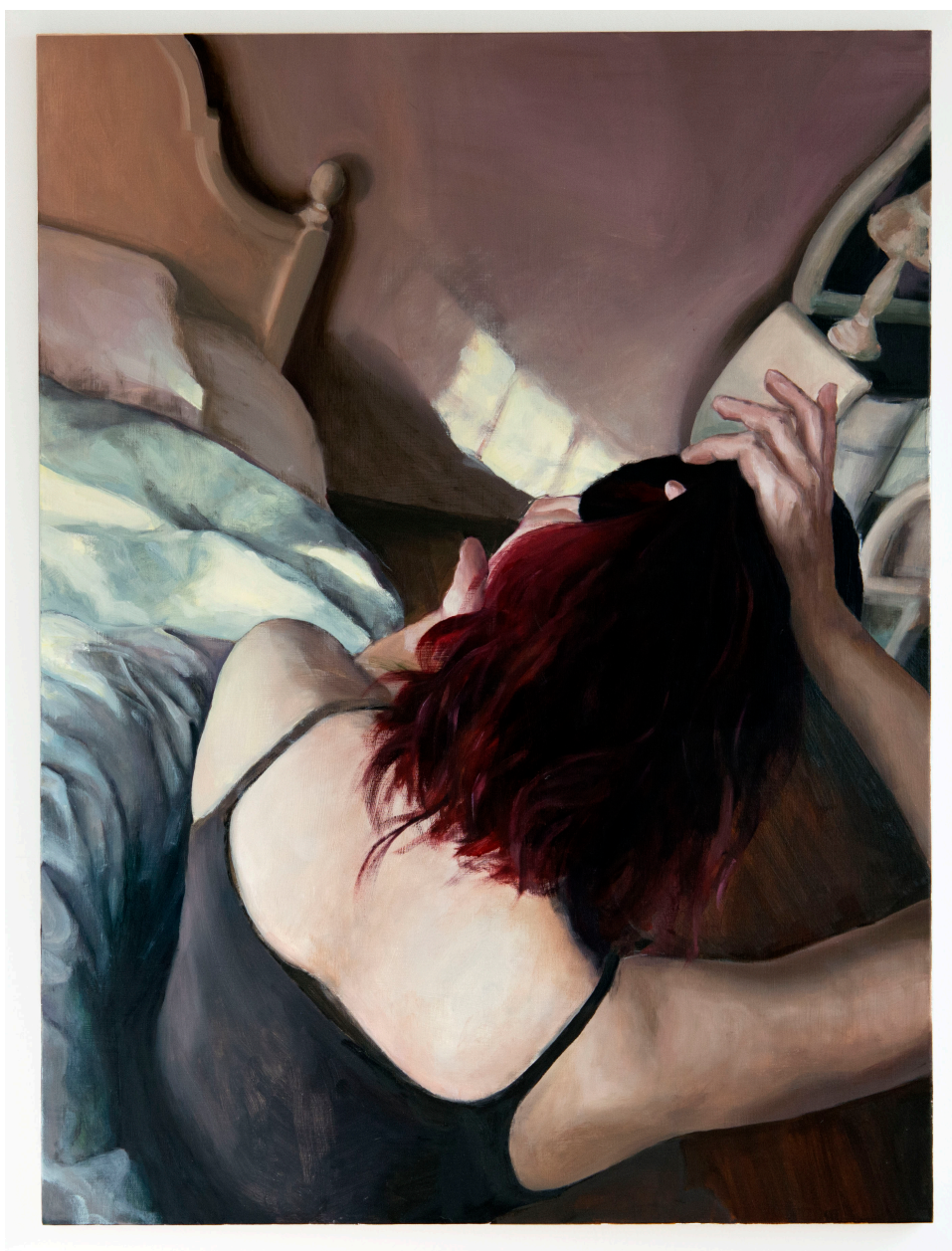


Plate 11

Song Park  
*Tying*  
2015  
oil on cotton duck  
4' x 3'



Plate 12

Song Park  
*Toilet*  
2015  
oil on cotton duck  
4' x 3'





Plate 13

Song Park  
*Bath*  
2015  
oil on cotton duck  
4' x 3'